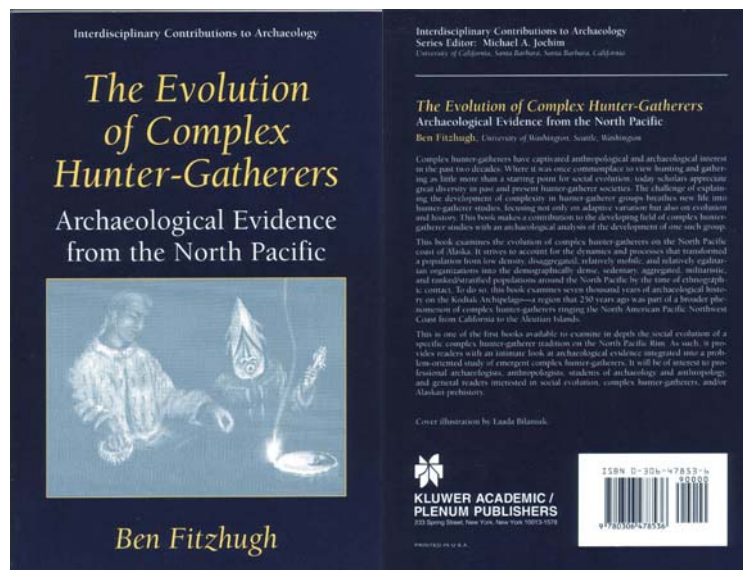


Fitzhugh, B. 2003. The evolution of complex hunter-gatherers. Archaeological evidence from the North Pacific. – New York, Kluwer Academic/Plenum Publishers

Book review by B.M. Fagan



In recent years, the ancient hunter-gatherer societies of western Alaska and the Pacific Northwest coast have come under long overdue, and welcome, archaeological scrutiny. A series of important field surveys and excavations have examined the rise of cultural complexity both in the Aleutian Islands and in southeastern Alaska, in an attempt to establish the relationship between this emerging intricacy and a seeming abundance of maritime resources throughout the region. Ben Fitzhugh's survey of Sitkalidak Island, which lies off the southeastern shore of Kodiak Island, homeland of the Alutiiq people, examines its colonisation and subsequent 7,500-year history from a behavioural ecological perspective. He draws insights from cultural ecology, neo-Marxism, and practice theory.

Fitzhugh uses a synthesis of behavioural ecology and processual archaeology to explain the emergence of cultural complexity in his study area, while also paying close attention to the contribution of individuals, an essential component of practice theory. He begins with a description of the Kodiak environment, with its important maritime resources, then provides a useful culture historical framework in chapter 3. Human settlement began at least 7,500 years ago and then unfolded with essential cultural continuity right into historic times. The culture history suffers from precise chronological resolution, which must await further research. Such an accurate time scale would permit more detailed study of the transitions between different cultural stages such as Ocean Bay and Kachemak about 3,200 years ago. Chapter 4 is devoted to a description of ethnohistoric Alutiiq culture and society, which was based hunting and gathering, a society where feasting, competitive display, and acquiring status were of pre-eminent importance.

Chapter 5 describes what is known of first settlement, an event that took place sometime between 8,000 and 7,500 years ago, from the Alaskan interior, in the hands of generalised hunter-gatherers. In chapter 6, Fitzhugh discusses the modelling of emergent cultural complexity on the north Pacific coast. He divides Kodiak cultural and social evolution into four 'acts': colonisation, the initial effects of colonisation, the effects of labour and technological intensification, and finally the emergence of what Fitzhugh calls "social asymmetry," in which social inequality arises as a result of unequal exposure to environmental risk and occasional food shortages. This occurs when some individuals are willing to subordinate equality for equal shares of food and other resources. In this model, Fitzhugh is in disagreement with other models that argue that the motivation for prestige and status lies in political competition. Fitzhugh believes that people adopt his strategy if their primary concern is survival, as was the case during the four acts of his archaeological drama.

The Sitkalidak Archaeological Project documents the findings from the survey and excavations that took place between 1993 and 1996. The objectives were to develop a basic culture history of 400 square kilometres of the island and the adjacent Kodiak coast and some insights into the changing settlement pattern; also information that would throw light on developing cultural complexity, as part of an effort to document the cultural resources there. The survey was a stratified one, focusing mainly on coastal areas, much of the inland terrain being steep and densely vegetated. In the end, the archaeologists documented 151 sites, of which only 38 were previously known. Twenty-five radiocarbon dates provided a skeletal chronological framework. Fitzhugh combined the

survey with excavations at four sites, which span the culture history of the island. The earliest, Tanginak Spring, dating to as early as 6,300 B.P. The data from the survey and excavations provided the basis for a site scale analysis. The study revealed little change in site size and complexity in the earlier periods of settlement. The Koniag period began about 800 years ago and witnessed a much greater density of sites, which included both much larger settlements and seasonal camps occupying almost every environmental niche possible, as people moved in to the outer coastal zone. In chapter 9, the author argues that a much greater level of social complexity developed in Koniag times, with the appearance of non-residential structures that reflect a new emphasis on feasting. This was also the time when slavery and endemic warfare dominated society. Population grew dramatically in late Kachemack and Koniag times, which did not coincide with a shift to large scale harvesting of marine resources that started earlier. What does all this mean? Fitzhugh argues that his data reflect a region that was not a paradise of abundant maritime foods, but one where there were constant shortages and dietary stress over many millennia. Thus, cultural complexity did not develop as a result of environmental productivity, as many authorities believe. Rather, it was population density and unequal access to environments with widely diverse productivity that led to cultural and social complexity as a strategy for long-term survival.

Fitzhugh's closely monograph is a welcome counterpoint to long established arguments over cultural complexity among hunter-gatherers. It is also an excellent example of full publication of an important field project in a timely and thorough fashion. As the author himself admits, research into the hunter-gatherer societies of coastal Alaska and the Pacific Northwest has hardly begun. This sophisticated and well constructed book is an important, theoretically sophisticated stepping stone along the way.

Even if Fitzhugh's arguments are only partially right, his study is exemplary. One only wishes that the publisher had done a better job of reproducing the photographs, many of which are somewhat muddy in their published form.

Fitzhugh, B. *The evolution of complex hunter-gatherers. Archaeological evidence from the North Pacific.* – New York, Kluwer Academic/Plenum Publishers. 331 pp. ISBN 0-306-47753-X. € 128.00/\$ 141.00 (hardback). ISBN 0306478536, € 56.00/\$ 62.00 (paperback).